Questions of inequality and fairness in society hinge on the relationship between where people start out in life (class origin) and where they are likely to end up (class destination). Yet we often don’t have a good picture—literally or metaphorically—of the contours of that relationship. Further, work on class mobility in the United States often glosses over the large differences between white and Black Americans’ class positions and mobility trajectories. This visualization, based on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, shows the association between occupational class origin and destination for Black and white employed Americans ages 25 to 69. Stark racial inequality, produced by the legacy and ongoing operation of white supremacy, is evident in each aspect of these figures.

First, there is a profound difference in the class distributions of Black and white Americans. Overall, Black Americans are twice as likely to be from working-class families or in working-class jobs as are white Americans, and half as likely to be from professional/managerial families or in those positions. But it is the difference in the rates of class reproduction (the paths from left to right) that Figure 1 really makes clear. For white people, the most common outcome is reproduction of class position: the thickest path for white people from professional/managerial families is into professional/managerial positions themselves. But for Black people from professional/managerial families, the most common outcome is downward mobility into routine/manual jobs. White upward mobility is twice as common as Black upward mobility: Less than 1 out of every 10 Black
Figure 1. Origin and destination, (a) Black adults ages 25 to 69 and (b) white adults ages 25 to 69.
Source: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015 wave.
Note: (a) n = 2,745. (b) n = 4,913. All original individual respondents and their family members and descendants are included if they were between the ages of 25 and 69 in 2015, reported a current or recent occupation for themselves, and reported at least one parent’s occupation. All figures are based on tables created using cross-sectional weights. Numbers to the left of each origin and destination group indicate the (weighted) proportion of respondents from each origin in each racial group; for example, the .53 on the bottom left corner of Figure 1a indicates that 53 percent of Black...
working-class-origin people end up in professional/managerial jobs, compared to 1 out of every 5 white working-class-origin people.

A full explanation of these differences is beyond the scope of this piece, but numerous studies indicate the influence of systemic and interpersonal racism on Black Americans’ trajectories, with older cohorts’ having navigated state-enforced racially discriminatory laws and policies. Black Americans are more likely than whites to face police violence, incarceration, and myriad other stressors and traumas (Branch and Jackson 2020). Subtle and overt discrimination suppresses Black achievement throughout the life course, from elementary school through careers and beyond. Black families in each big class-group have on average far less wealth, have lower incomes, and live in poorer neighborhoods than whites in the same group (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Pattillo 2013).

The research above describes a range of unjust, unfair challenges Black Americans confront and lends empirical support to the belief that as a group they must work twice as hard to get half as far.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References


Author Biographies

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Figure 1. (continued)